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AUTHOR Stahl, Norman A.; King, James R.
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ABSTRACT

The legacy of reading professionals should be preserved through recollections, memories, or life stories of classroom reading teachers and university professors of reading education. The oral history project serves as the appropriate methodology for such an undert king. The memories that comprise the human library, when preserved through oral history activities, allow the current and future generations to understand: (1) the impact of educational events and important personalities; (2) a holistic view of the literacy profession as a whole and the field's various hierarchical status groups of the past; and (3) the current professional generation since the field's professional ancestors influenced current literacy professionals. The overall purpose of the oral history project should be to preserve contributions to the field of literacy and perspectives on trends in the area of literacy across the past 5 decades. Foundational activities at the beginning of such a project include identification of both the individuals who are to undertake the oral histories and also those individuals who will be interviewed. Sample issues for consideration during the oral history interviews include basic background information, early family background, schooling, professional induction years, graduate school, professional maturity, reflections on personal life, and thoughts about the future of the profession. (Contains 24 references.) (RS)

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Preserving the Heritage of a Profession

Through Oral History Projects

Norman A. Stahl
Faculty in Reading
159 Gable Hall
Northern Illinois University
DeKalb, IL 60115
e-mail: STAHL@NIU.EDU

James R. King
University of South Florida

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Preserving the Heritage of a Profession Through Oral History Projects

Within the legacies from the cognitive revolution and the unquestioned proliferation of technology across the past four decades, reading professionals have faced constant pressure to balance on the cutting edge of knowledge. Our balancing is often achieved without always having had opportunities to fully digest the research of the present or integrate richness the of past. As Stahl, King, and Eilers (1996) have pointed out, being overly future sighted is its own form of professional myopia.

Still the profession may draw upon a body of literature which is focused on our professional heritage and which can guide and enrich those colleagues who may be more future oriented. Historians in the field of reading have employed varied forms of historical analysis and schemes of categorization of past endeavors. For instance, a number of schemes have been used in the USA to differentiate between historical trends/eras pertaining to reading pedagogy. Individuals such as Smith (1965), Leedy (1958), and Robinson, Faraone, Hittleman, & Unruh (1988) formed historical eras; Lowe (1970) and Cook (1977) used each decade as a marker; Moore, Readence, & Rickelman (1983) and Shannon (1989) approached our history through thematic topics; Stahl, Simpson, & Brozo (1988) and Pearson (1996) have built

analyses upon trends and methods of research. In the United Kingdom, the UKRA has been a sponsor of edited monographs (Brooks & Pugh, 1984, Brooks, Pugh, & Hall, 1993) that bring together reading historians from varied venues.

These chroniclers and historians have helped to preserve our knowledge of the field as well as to present alternative lenses through which to interpret our accepted beliefs. Still, the premises put forward in such reports have tended to be based on textual sources (eg., governmental documents/records, research papers, theoretical articles, classroom materials, personal journals) as found in various public and private archives and personal collections. All too often, the direct recollections of contributors to our history have been overlooked.

Hence, we believe that there is another avenue to be followed in the preservation of a rich field of understanding about our endeavors during the 20th century. It is our recommendation then that our legacy as reading professionals should be preserved through recollections, memories, or life stories of classroom reading teachers and university professors of reading education. The oral history project (Baum, 1987; Caunce, 1994; Kyrig & Marty, 1982; Sitton, Mehaffy & Davis, 1983; Thompson, 1988; Zimmerman, 1982) serves as the appropriate methodology for such an undertaking. The data that is produced becomes the oral

evidence to be preserved through the transcription process.

It is our purpose in this article to present a call to our colleagues in the United Kingdom to develop an UKRA sponsored oral history project with the goal of preserving the professional knowledge and unique understandings and insights developed by a generation of professionals reaching or having attained retirement age after serving the reading field for the past 40-50 years. It is the task of the preservation of the most fragile and irreplaceable form of historical evidence -- the human memory.

The memories that comprise the human library, when preserved through oral history activities, allow the current and the future generations to understand 1.) the impact of educational events and important personalities through the capturing of vital incidents, particular details not likely to be found in print, and the general élan of a period; 2.) a holistic view of the literacy profession as a whole and also the field's various hierarchical status groups of the past; and to a degree; 3.) the current professional generation since our professional ancestors have influenced all of us (Stahl, King, Dillon, & Walker, 1994).

Purpose Building

There is a very basic yet most important stage of building the foundation for any oral history project before

the interview process begins. The primary task in any oral history project is the formulation of the guiding purpose. In the case of the undertaking proposed for the profession in this paper, the overall purpose focuses on preserving contributions to the field of literacy and perspectives on trends in the area of literacy across the past five decades. The initial activity includes consulting the appropriate background reference sources issued during the period being covered. Sources which should be reviewed include professional journals, methods texts, instructional textbooks, and curriculum materials. The oversight team and the persons undertaking the interviews need to have a working knowledge of the era so that a context for understanding the information from the discussants will exist. This familiarization is consistent with accepted oral history practices.

Participants

The identification of both the individuals who are to undertake the oral histories and also those individuals who will be interviewed are the foundational activities at the beginning of a project. The selection process must be concerned with individuals who may be placed in the category of the "elites" as well as those persons categorized as the "non-elites" (McMahon, 1989). The former are those individuals who have through presentation, publication, and service activities attained levels of professional visibility that will provide a form of professional immortality. In the

case of "elite" literacy professionals, familiarization with their writing by the interviewers is essential.

The process of interviewing and the interpretation of the interview can be enhanced through the each researcher's familiarity with the respective informant's writing. From a verificative perspective, these documents can also function as a form of triangulation. Such a triangulation process is further supported through the review of any interviewee's personal papers and the verification of data through recollections of his or her peers (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Dillon, 1985).

The "non-elites" are far less likely to have left a written legacy of their careers, and hence, there is great importance in preserving the historical vantage of such a population. In the selection process of "non-elites," informants should provide representation from various status groups (e.g., classroom teachers, reading-language arts consultants, program administrators, adult literacy instructors, college access program study strategy specialists, teacher trainers, and researchers), regionally situated groups (e.g., rural sites, urban centers, and urban collar communities), and multiple ethnic communities.

To identify potential interviewees that fall within the "non-elite" category it is helpful to speak with senior staff

members of schools as well as individuals who are leaders in community service agencies, day centers, specialist organizations, or residential homes, that may serve senior citizens. Before interviewing these professionals, the interviewers might wish to study local school records and curriculum materials as well as to obtain informal recollections from members of the professional community to provide forms of important localized background information. It is important to be aware that selection processes are sensitive to the effect of hierarchically-based sampling.

Each of the interviewees, whether "elite" or the "non-elite", should have a lived experience that presumably reflects the spirit of the era and a willingness to be interviewed as part of an oral history project. Hence, the interviewee must be informed of the project's intent as well as the nature of information that will be queried. Furthermore the informant must be comfortable with an interview process where he or she will do most of the talking while the recollections are tape recorded (or in recent years video recorded). It is most important then that each participant have the physical well-being plus the mental capabilities to participate fully in the interview process. Finally, any participant must give consent to the publication of the oral history report, contingent on each participant's prior approval of the written document.

The individuals who may serve as interviewers for a national project may come from a range of backgrounds. For instance, historians from professional organizations might conduct interviews of influential individuals associated closely with the respective organization. Reading centers at universities across the nation might sponsor interviews of individuals who have served with the respective center or have contributed more directly to the local scene. Graduate students in reading pedagogy programs can conduct life histories of local teachers as part of course work assignments (King, 1991). The life history or oral history project could serve as a thesis option at the masters level and as a dissertation experience at the doctoral level.

Since the interview process will require a formulation of a close working relationship between interviewer and interviewee (Denzin, 1989), care must be taken in planning the "matches" for oral history interviews. Bragg (1987) has noted that the interaction between interviewer and interviewee will greatly influence the information that comes forward to be used as data. Also the greater the degree of fit between the interviewer and interviewee, the greater the cooperation between parties and the commitment to task completion.

Interview Guides

Becoming familiar with the curricula and the research for

the historical era from which the documents came will support the process of designing an interview guide. Within such a guide there are topics or open-ended questions which informally guide the interview (Patton, 1990; Sitton, Mehaffy, & Davis, 1983). While interview guides are not always used by interviewers, their use should be given some consideration. That way life history narratives may share some structured similarities across the national project and be more available for cross-case analysis by the UKRA at a future time.

To assist with the development of interview guides for a national project, we provide the following set of sample issues for consideration. These topics may be easily converted into open-ended interview questions. Certainly, interviewers should feel free to revise the list to meet local needs.

Sample Issues for Literacy Oral History Projects

Basic Background Information

- Date of birth, place of birth, socio-economic-cultural background of origin
- Martial status, spouse's occupation, ages of children, current socio-economic-cultural background

Early Family Background

- Influence of parents, parents' or caregivers'

occupations, other important figures, family child rearing practices, nature of the neighborhood, home atmosphere, role of religion, relationship to siblings,

Current relationship to family, return home for visits

Early Schooling

Location of school, nature of school, influential teachers, important events shaping the future, favorite subjects, least favored subjects, factors of prejudice, parents feelings about schooling at this level, relationship to peers, academic achievement

Extracurricular activities, hobbies, vacation activities

Secondary School Years

Location of school, nature of school, influential teachers, important events shaping the future, favorite subjects, least favored subjects, factors of prejudice, parents feelings about schooling at this level, relationship to peers, academic achievement

Extracurricular activities, hobbies, vacation activities

College Years

Location of school, nature of school, influential

teachers, important events shaping the future, favorite subjects, least favored subjects, factors of prejudice, parents feelings about schooling at this level, relationship to peers, academic achievement, methods courses

Extracurricular activities, hobbies, vacation activities

Professional Induction Years

Student teaching experiences-peers, school, supervisors, students, mentors, key remembrances

First professional job- peers, school, supervisors, students, mentors, key remembrances

Additional professional experiences

Graduate School

Mentors, influential readings, important classes, key experiences

Professional Maturity

Motivations, new goals, theoretical orientations, new mentors

Influential events, curriculum, professional trends

Employment history--most satisfying aspects--least satisfying aspects

Most important contributions, writings, programs developed

Students mentored

- Important colleagues

Reflections on One's Professional Life

- Accomplishments, failures, satisfactions, dissatisfactions,
- Important co-workers influencing career
- Key events shaping career
- Accounting for current position in field (luck or deliberate action)
- History's view of one's work

Reflections on One's Personal Life

- Accomplishments, failures, satisfactions, dissatisfactions
- Marriages, children
- Support from family for career
- Leisure time activities
- Thoughts about retirement
- Relationships with friends (current and old)
- Sociopolitical views
- Accounting for current position
- Costs to personal life for professional achievement

Thoughts About the Future of the Profession

- Important trends and individuals in the profession
- Recommendations for new professionals

The topics in this interview guide should be viewed as but a starting point for any oral history interview. In no case should an interviewer be a slave to the interview guide provided here. As noted earlier, concern should be directed to the addition of questions that draw forth information to capture local color. On the other hand, the rather thorough nature of the guide should provide a degree of comfort to the neophyte interviewer.

A Modest Closure

We recognize that a "national oral history" of the reading profession may sound grandiose. In fact, we are excited about the eventual accumulation of lives in reading education. Conversely, we are humbly aware that the worth of such an undertaking is solely dependent upon individuals private conversations. We think that this intimacy can lead to new insights, fresh perspectives, and renewed pride in our profession. All of these seem to be very worthwhile objectives for a profession looking forward to the new millennium.

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